

Long-Distance Phone Calls Found Easy to Intercept

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Long-distance telephone calls have become so easy for blackmailers and others to intercept that they should be coded, a Pentagon executive in charge of communications said yesterday.

Intercepting calls that many telephone companies send from city to city by microwave radio "is a simple and straightforward matter for any underworld organization, blackmailer, terrorist or foreign power," said Thomas C. Reed, Pentagon director of communications systems.

Speaking before the Comstock Club of Sacramento, he called on Congress to provide money for scramblers that could make both civilian and military communications safer from eavesdroppers.

"Modern computer techniques make it possible to sort through" the telephone calls radioed from one city to

another "and find target conversations fairly easily," Reed said.

Without specifying the cost, Reed said "a small investment in microwave radio scrambler development could lead to secure telephones in this decade." Apparently he envisions private telephone companies employing the scrambling devices the Pentagon wants to buy.

A spokesman for the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co. here said his firm is among those that rely on microwave radio to transit some long-distance calls because land lines cannot handle them all.

A spokesman for the American Telephone & Telegraph Co. expressed "grave doubts" that intercepting microwave signals would be an easy job, adding that the telephone company has no evidence that such interception has taken place.

He said as many as 30,000

telephone calls in signals—not voice—travel along a microwave beam at one time. He said it would take huge equipment to sift through the signals and reconstitute the conversations.

Reed said that Congress made "drastic cuts" in the Pentagon budget this year and crimped its plans to buy scramblers to protect military communications in the field.

The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong found eavesdropping on American battlefield voice communications, which were not coded, so helpful that they deployed 4,000 to 5,000 men to do the job in South Vietnam alone, Reed said.

"Your and my inability to conduct a private, long-distance telephone conversation requires action," Reed continued. "Those American casualties from ambushes, minings and attacks on helicopters in Vietnam cry out for action."